

Forum: Special Political & Decolonisation Committee (GA4)

Issue: The Rise of Ethnic Populism in Europe

Student Officer: Philip Voultzos

Position: Co-Chair



Personal Introduction

Dear Delegates,

My name is Philip Voultzos, and I am a second year IGCSE student at Byron College. For this session of ACGMUN, I have the utmost honour of serving as the Co-Chair of the Special Political and Decolonisation Committee (GA4). This will be my first ACGMUN, my third time chairing and my overall twenty-first conference.

This study guide regards the second topic of the GA4 committee of this conference, namely “The Rise of Ethnic Populism in Europe”, and aims to give you a thorough and concise outlook on the issue, as well as pointing you in the right direction for the rest of your own research (which, trust me, you really should do!).

On a more personal note, having followed the rise of populism in Europe for many years, and especially considering the drastic effects that movements such as Brexit and Reform UK had and continue to have on the UK and on myself (being a British national), it will be all the more interesting to see what measures this committee will choose to pursue. I genuinely look forward to meeting you all and learning how each one of you will decide to approach this topic, and what unique and intriguing ideas you will bring to the table.

However, if you have any questions about the topic, committee or conference in general, please do not hesitate to contact me via email at voultzosp@protonmail.com, or the Chair of GA4, Cecilia Passa, at ceciliampassa@gmail.com. See you all this March!

Best Regards,

Philip Voultzos

Topic Introduction

Populist movements across Europe have evolved from minor, and often ill-perceived, political movements to major pillars of governance within Europe, fundamentally altering the structure of liberal democracy in their wake. Originally emerging as a reaction to perceived elites within government and mainstream consensus politics, populist movements have gradually increased in popularity, rising from just 12% of the total European vote in the early 2000s to 20% by the 2010s and then surging to 32% by the early-mid 2020s.¹ This surge and the overall rapid growth seen in populist movements represent not just a shift in voter preference, but an enormous change in the entire political landscape in Europe, as the movement grew from the East to the West.²

Modern European politics are increasingly connected with identity politics, or in other words, demographically specific policies, particularly regarding ethnicity, growing upon the pre-existing class-based divides. Economic anxiety and cultural backlash both propelled the rise of Ethnic Populism, creating a feedback loop where financial uncertainty amplified cultural insecurity.³ Overlapping crises, known as polycrisis, such as the 2008 financial crisis, the 2015-2016 refugee crisis, the Brexit referendum and the COVID-19 pandemic, have acted as large scale catalyst for this phenomenon.⁴ These events cultivated a fertile ground for actors who frame politics as a moral struggle between native people and corrupt elites or dangerous outsiders. By late 2025, the normalisation of these narratives has led to major electoral realignments in major EU states, including the Netherlands, France, Italy and Germany.⁵

The rise in the adoption and acceptance of ethnic populist policies threatens and has proven itself able to demolish the current global order. Tackling ethnic populism can be considered essential for the continued existence of a globalised world, multi-national organisations, and even the United Nations itself. This is all the more important considering the vast causes and effects of the increasing spread of ethnic populism, which all represent their own equally important threats to different aspects

¹ Henley, Jon. "Revealed: One in Three Europeans Now Vote Anti-establishment." *The Guardian*, 22 Sept. 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/21/revealed-one-in-three-europeans-now-votes-anti-establishment.

² Solace Global. "The Populist Wave in Europe | 2024 Intelligence Forecast." *Solace Global*, 19 Feb. 2025, www.solaceglobal.com/report/populism-europe-2024.

³ PsychOpen. "Cultural Threats Versus Economic Insecurities: A Role-Playing Experiment on Supporting Populist Radical Discourses." *PsychOpen*, 30 Sept. 2025, www.jspp.psychopen.eu/index.php/jspp/article/view/14989/14989.html.

⁴ *The Green Deal in Times of Polycrisis: Aligning Short-term Responses With Long-term Commitments*. www.epc.eu/publication/The-Green-Deal-in-times-of-polycrisis-Aligning-short-term-responses-w-5893c8.

⁵ Chopin, Thierry, et al. "Political Dynamics Ahead of the European Parliament Elections: Implications for the EU's Political Direction and Policy Priorities." *Institut Jacques Delors*, 302, May 2024, www.institutdelors.eu/content/uploads/2025/04/PP302_Political_dynamics_ahead_EE202_Chopin_EN.pdf.

of our current world order, and even our own personal lives. In other words, the rise of ethnic populism has and most certainly has the ability to shape our tomorrow.

Definition of Key Terms

Anti-establishment

Anti-establishment is defined as being “opposed to or directed against the establishment”, in other words, when one is against having powerful people who insist on continuing an ongoing situation in positions of leadership and power⁶.

Austerity

Austerity is defined as “a difficult economic situation caused by a government reducing the amount of money it spends”, in other words, an economic situation which results in fewer public services, derived from a sharp reduction in government spending⁷.

Democratic Backsliding

Democratic Backsliding is defined as “the process of declining integrity for democratic values or institutions in a political system”, and usually occurs when essential democratic components, such as free elections and freedom of press, are gradually weakened by the reigning government⁸.

Ethnic Populism (Ethnopolitism)

Ethnic Populism, otherwise known as ethnopolitism, is defined as “a form of political mobilisation in which a leader rallies support from a specific ethnic group or groups along communal lines”, in other words, when a leader gains support from an ethnic group by campaigning on very specific issues that divide them from other ethnic groups⁹.

Euroscepticism

⁶ *Anti-establishment*. 24 Dec. 2025, www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/anti-establishment.

⁷ *Austerity*. 24 Dec. 2025, www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/austerity.

⁸ Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs. “Democratic Backsliding.” *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, www.carnegiecouncil.org/explore-engage/key-terms/democratic-backsliding.

⁹ Cheeseman, Nicholas. “A Dictionary of African Politics.” *Oxford University Press eBooks*, 2019, doi:10.1093/acref/9780191828836.001.0001.

Euroscepticism is defined as “a political stance characterised by scepticism or opposition to the European Union and its powers”, in other words, the political stance that opposes participation and, by extension, the yielding of part of the domestic government to the EU¹⁰.

Globalisation

Globalisation is defined as “a situation in which available goods and services, or social and cultural influences, gradually become similar in all parts of the world”, in other words, the slowly increasing spread of cultural and social trends and norms across countries¹¹.

Identity Politics

Identity Politics is defined as “political beliefs and systems that places lot of importance on the group to which people see themselves as belonging to, especially according to their race, gender, sexual orientation” or religion¹².

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is defined as “the belief that different cultures within a society should all be given importance”, in other words, the belief that all cultures should be treated with the same importance within a country¹³.

Nativism

Nativism is defined as “the political idea that people who were born in a country are more important than immigrants”, in other words, the idea that people born within a country should receive more attention from the government than immigrants¹⁴.

Polarisation

¹⁰ “Euroscepticism (EU-scepticism) | Research Starters | EBSCO Research.” EBSCO, www.ebsco.com/research-starters/diplomacy-and-international-relations/euroscepticism-eu-scepticism.

¹¹ *Globalization*. 24 Dec. 2025, www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/globalization.

¹² *Identity Politics*. 24 Dec. 2025, www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/identity-politics.

¹³ *Multiculturalism*. 24 Dec. 2025, www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/multiculturalism.

¹⁴ *Nativism*. 3 Dec. 2025, www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/nativism.

Polarisation is defined as “the act of dividing something, especially something that contains different people or opinions, into two completely opposing groups”, in other words, the divide of a populus into two distinct groups with little to no perceived common ground¹⁵.

Populism

Populism is defined as “political ideas and activities that are intended to get the support of ordinary people by giving them what they want”, in other words, a political ideology focused on satisfying the needs of a majority group within a country¹⁶.

Securitisation

Securitisation is defined as “the process by which an issue [...] is understood as an existential threat to a referent object (most commonly, but not necessarily, a state) requiring in response the adoption of exceptional emergency measures”¹⁷.

Background Information

The contribution of crises to the rise of Ethnic Populism

The 2008 Financial Crisis

The 2008 Financial Crisis served as a turning point in the belief in governance. It was triggered by the collapse of the United States housing market and caused the Eurozone GDP to drop by 4.5% in 2009, creating the largest recession since the 1930s¹⁸. It shattered the political consensus largely present post-WW2. For the first time, mainstream parties struggled to maintain the fallout of the crisis, as youth unemployment in countries such as Greece and Spain exceeding 50% during the crisis, and the governments became increasingly put at blame by their citizens for mass and systemic economic mismanagement¹⁹. The opposition to mainstream

¹⁵ *Polarization*. 24 Dec. 2025, www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/polarization?q=polarisation.

¹⁶ *Populism*. 3 Dec. 2025, www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/populism.

¹⁷ Brown, Garrett W., et al. “The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations.” *Oxford University Press eBooks*, 2018, doi:10.1093/acref/9780199670840.001.0001.

¹⁸ *World Bank Open Data*. (n.d.). World Bank Open Data. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=XC>.

¹⁹ *Youth employment support*. (2025, May 16). Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/eu-employment-policies/youth-employment-support_en#:~:text=Finding%20employment%20is%20very%20important,%2C%20it%20stood%20at%2015%25.

governments created an ideal vacuum for populist rhetoric to spread, allowing the staple extremist policies to be deemed more acceptable amidst a power vacuum²⁰.

In Southern Europe, the crisis led to the imposition of strict austerity measures from the European Central Bank (ECB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the European Commission, an external pressure that fuelled both left-wing and right-wing populism, which was seen as a response to foreign technocrats²¹. Concurrently, in Northern and Western Europe, the crisis created “welfare chauvinism”, where populist figures argued that the European welfare state was overly generous and a finite resource that could only remain sustainable if restricted to just the native population, explicitly excluding migrants²².

The 2015 Refugee Crisis

The mass arrival of over 1.3 million asylum seekers in Europe, from conflict zones such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, in 2015 triggered a wave of cultural anxiety and security fears among locals²³. Ethnic populist figures capitalised on this wave by pointing out links, although often unsubstantiated, between mass migration, the “Islamisation” of Europe, and terrorist threats – narratives which gained a massive amount of traction following two high-profile terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels²⁴.

This period solidified a growing rift in the European Union (EU), with Western countries initially promoting a welcoming culture; while Eastern European countries rejected the mandatory relocation quotas imposed by the EU, arguing that the quotas infringed upon their right to maintain cultural homogeneity²⁵. Some nations even took extreme measures, for example, Hungary constructed a 175km long razor-wire fence along its border with Serbia²⁶.

²⁰ Kriesi, Hanspeter, and Takis Pappas, editors. “Populism in Europe During Crisis: An Introduction.” *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*, European University Institute Press, www.eui.eu/projects/polcon/documents/kriesiandpappas2014.pdf.

²¹ International Monetary Fund. *The IMF and the European Debt Crisis*. www.elibrary.imf.org/downloadpdf/display/book/9798400231902/CH001.pdf.

²² Haenraets, Rosan, and Femke Roosma. “Welfare Chauvinism in Times of Crises: The Impact of the Radical Right Political Discourse.” *Journal of European Social Policy*, www.rekrutacja.uw.edu.pl/files/pdf/SPP-P_1ek3_25.pdf.

²³ Georgiou, Myria, and Rafal Zaborowski. “Media Coverage of the ‘Refugee Crisis’: A cross-European Perspective.” *Council of Europe*, DG1(2017)03, 2017, www.rm.coe.int/1680706b00.

²⁴ Helbling, Marc, and Daniel Meierrieks. “Terrorism and Migration: An Overview.” *British Journal of Political Science*, *British Journal of Political Science*, Sept. 2020, doi:10.1017/S0007123420000587.

²⁵ Bachman, Bart. “Diminishing Solidarity: Polish Attitudes toward the European.” *migrationpolicy.org*, 2 Mar. 2017, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/diminishing-solidarity-polish-attitudes-toward-european-migration-and-refugee-crisis.

²⁶ Welle, D. (2015, August 30). Hungary finishes anti-refugee fence. *dw.com*. <https://www.dw.com/en/hungary-completes-anti-refugee-fence-on-serbian-border/a-18681725>.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic initially provided a short-lived unifying effect for incumbent governments, with both governments and citizens shocked by the sudden onset of the pandemic. Populist movements soon began exploiting the health crisis to demand permanent border closures and retreat from globalisation, following the temporary shuttering of borders to prevent the spread of the virus²⁷. The lockdowns also created an ideal environment for disinformation, as anti-lockdown sentiment merged with broader anti-globalist sentiment. These narratives and conspiracy theories framed the global pandemic as a tool of “globalist elites” that intended to strip citizens of fundamental rights and liberties, further distancing the idea that major parties believed in the will of the people. This greatly amplified the rise in support for ethnic populist agendas²⁸.

The Democratic Backsliding caused by Ethnic Populism

Democratic backsliding is essentially the government-led process of weakening key political institutions that ensure and sustain a free society. This process usually occurs gradually, and from a populist aspect, usually begins when populist figures begin to use their electoral mandate to argue that the will of the people should not be restricted by laws. When these checks and balances are removed by ethnic populists, their power becomes completely unchecked, allowing them to suppress all groups other than their own.

Illiberal Democracy

A defining feature of modern European politics is the rise of “Illiberal Democracy”, a concept proposed by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban since 2014. He argues that a state can be democratic in its electoral process without being liberal in its values²⁹. This framework would prioritise the majority over the protection of minority rights and the checks and balances required in a constitutional democracy³⁰. This has rapidly become a staple policy of populist leaders, as it benefits their position of power.

²⁷ Zhang, Jing, and Zhipeng Li. “Book Review: Populism and the Politicization of the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe.” *Party Politics*, vol. 29, no. 2, Aug. 2022, p. 408, doi:10.1177/13540688221119687.

²⁸ Ferreira, Gil Baptista. *Conspiracy Theories in Times of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Populism, Social Media and Misinformation*. 20 Dec. 2021, www.journals.openedition.org/cs/6119?lang=en.

²⁹ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp.” *Government*, www.2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp.

³⁰ Smilova, Ruzha. “Conceptual Space for Illiberal Democracy.” *Politics and Governance Journal*, July 2025, doi:10.17645/pag.9734.

Institutional Capture

Once in power, ethnic populist leaders often engage in institutional capture to solidify their influence, for example, by directly appointing loyalists to the court. The main target for institutional capture is the judiciary; a prime example being how the Law and Justice (PiS) party of Poland reformed the Constitutional Tribunal to ensure the court was filled with loyalists who would not dismiss government proposals.³¹ Furthermore, these administrations would also often utilise public broadcasters as government mouthpieces while simultaneously pressuring private media companies to be sold to government allies, a prime example being the KESMA Foundation in Hungary.³² Finally, civil society is limited by labelling non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as “foreign agents”, delegitimising any organised opposition as unpatriotic or foreign-funded, effectively stripping core democratic values from our societies.³³

The Normalisation of Ethnic Populist Principles

Adaptation by the Centre-right

As populist parties gained voters, more traditional centre-right parties have begun adopting more of their rhetoric and policy in the hopes of remaining attractive to their voter base. A prime example of this is the German CDU party, which has shifted its stance on migration policy to be similar to that of the AfD party³⁴. This leads to the normalisation of extreme policies, where policies such as remigration, which were once considered extreme, are now something that regular people find reasonable³⁵. This practice gradually shifts the entire political spectrum rightward.

The Rise of Coalitions with Far-right Parties

The beginning of far-right parties’ participation in coalition governments has shifted ethnic populism from a minor protest movement to a legitimate governing philosophy, essentially

³¹ Pellegrina, Lucia Dalla, et al. “Judicial Transformation: The Case of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal.” *European Journal of Political Research*, Nov. 2025, pp. 1–28, doi:10.1017/s1475676525100340.

³² KESMA – State Media Monitor. 11 Sept. 2025, www.statemediamonitor.com/2025/09/kesma.

³³ Article 19. “Hungary: Act on the Defence of National Sovereignty.” *Article 19*, 2024, www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Hungary-Foreign-Agents-law-analysis-ARTICLE-19.pdf.

³⁴ “German election winner Merz urges harder line on immigration, independence from US | The Times of Israel.” *The Times of Israel*, 25 Feb. 2025, www.timesofisrael.com/german-election-winner-merz-urges-harder-line-on-immigration-independence-from-us.

³⁵ Shamim, Sarah. “What is remigration, the far-right fringe idea going mainstream?” *Al Jazeera*, 26 Dec. 2025, www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/26/what-is-remigration-the-far-right-fringe-idea-going-mainstream.

servicing as the legitimisation of ethnic populism as a viable and possible government. Some notable examples include the Tido Agreement in Sweden, the inclusion of the Finns Party in the Finnish government, Giorgia Meloni's government in Italy, and Geert Wilders' coalition influence in the Netherlands³⁶. All of these coalitions and influences created a permanent rightward shift in policy for each country, while also forcing a narrowing in the flexibility that future governments will have on addressing key issues addressed by populist movements, such as immigration. These coalitions and partnerships are a result of the end of the "cordon sanitaire", a long-standing political practise where mainstream parties refused collaboration with far-right parties.

The Role of Online Media and the Rise of Disinformation

Algorithmic Polarisation

Most social media platforms use algorithms that prioritise serving high-engagement content to users, creating an echo chamber effect, whereby interacting with content that provokes an emotional response within the user, the algorithm is encouraged to show similar content to the user again. This means that users are exposed to information, which usually ends up being emotional, inflammatory and polarising, that only reinforces their existing biases³⁷.

Disinformation Campaigns

Disinformation campaigns have the ability and have proven their ability to propel the spread of extremist theories. One of the most significant such theories was the "Great Replacement", a conspiracy theory that claimed that political elites were plotting to replace native Europeans with non-European populations³⁸. These domestic narratives are often amplified by foreign interference, in this case, particularly Russian bot networks, aiming to destabilise the EU by increasing stress on internal social and political divisions within the bloc³⁹.

³⁶ Halikiopoulou, Daphne. *The Endurance and Stability of the Far Right in Europe*. 2024, www.feps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/20.-The-endurance-and-stability-of-the-far-right-in-Europe.pdf.

³⁷ Cinelli, Matteo, et al. "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 118, no. 9, Feb. 2021, doi:10.1073/pnas.2023301118.

³⁸ "The Great Replacement." An Explainer, ADL. "The Great Replacement: an Explainer | ADL." *ADL*, 19 Dec. 2023, www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/great-replacement-explainer.

³⁹ "2nd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats." *EEAS*, Youth employment support. (2025, May 16). Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/eu-employment-policies/youth-employment-support_en#:~:text=Finding%20employment%20is%20very%20important,%2C%20it%20stood%20at%2015%25.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

France

The primary populist force in France is the Rassemblement National (RN) Party, currently led by Jordan Bardella. The RN is the most electorally successful nationalist party in Western Europe, taking 31.4% of the vote in the 2024 European Parliament elections in France⁴⁰. The party, particularly under Bardella, has suggested a “de-demonisation” policy, which aims to rid the party of its historical links to racism and antisemitism, to appear electable yet still retain its core nativist policies⁴¹. Such policies include the “National Preference” system, where welfare priority is given to French citizens, as well as the transformation of the EU into a less regulatory and restrictive “Alliance of Nations”⁴². These will create mass imbalances between citizens and non-citizens within the same economic class, increasing poverty rates. Furthermore, a weakened EU will require increased barriers to trade, which would lower economic growth.

Germany

The primary populist party in Germany is the Alternative for Germany (AfD), led by Alice Weidel and Tino Chrupalla, and is the first far-right to enter the Bundestag since World War 2⁴³. Following the 2025 general elections, AfD became the second-largest party in Germany, holding 152 seats despite their classification as a “suspected extremist” party by German National Intelligence⁴⁴. They advocate for radical policies such as remigration, which has upheld the cordon sanitaire between itself and other parties, despite AfD being the largest opposition force. This firewall has prevented AfD from entering a federal coalition⁴⁵.

Hungary

⁴⁰ Ray, and Michael. “National Rally | History, Members, Policies, and Platform.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14 Jan. 2026, www.britannica.com/topic/National-Rally-France.

⁴¹ Ayuso, Silvia, et al. “Jordan Bardella Accelerates the Path to Power of France’s Far Right.” *EL PAÍS English*, 1 July 2024, www.english.elpais.com/international/2024-07-01/jordan-bardella-accelerates-the-path-to-power-of-frances-far-right.html.

⁴² Paillou, Sarah, and Nicolas Camut. “How France’s National Rally Plans to Take the European Parliament Hostage.” *POLITICO*, 16 Feb. 2024, www.politico.eu/article/how-frances-national-rally-plans-to-take-the-european-parliament-hostage.

⁴³ Matthias, and Meg. “Alternative for Germany (AfD) | Beliefs, Platform, Election Results, and Scandals.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 19 Jan. 2026, www.britannica.com/topic/Alternative-for-Germany.

⁴⁴ Officer, Federal Returning. *Results Germany - the Federal Returning Officer*. www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2025/ergebnisse/bund-99.html.

⁴⁵ Thurau, Jens, and Elizabeth Schumacher. “Germany: What Is the ‘AfD Firewall’?” *dw.com*, 31 Jan. 2025, www.dw.com/en/afd-firewall-germany-political-consensus-explained/a-71457050.

Currently led by the Fidesz Party (since 2010) with Viktor Orbán as Prime Minister. Hungary was the first EU state to follow illiberal democracy practices by actively dismantling constitutional checks and balances⁴⁶. This process has transitioned the state into what the European Parliament now classifies as a “hybrid regime of electoral autocracy” where democratic institutions exist but in practice do not function⁴⁷. The administration has also introduced highly controversial laws that criminalise providing aid to migrants and ban LGBTQ+ content in education, while concurrently maintaining close economic ties with Russia and China⁴⁸. Due to these factors, Hungary has and continues to be subject to multiple EU Article 7 proceedings, and as a consequence has permanently lost over €1 billion in European Union (EU) subsidies⁴⁹. On a more global scale, Hungary is seen as a key friction point within NATO, as its pro-Russian ties clash with NATO's mandate and other fellow Member States' opinions, particularly on issues such as the war in Ukraine.

Italy

Led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (Fdi) party (since 2022). It is the first founding EU member state that is led by a party with post-fascist roots, and is led by one of the most pragmatic faces in modern populism.⁵⁰ Meloni's administration has introduced some sovereigntist policies, such as blockades on naval migration and a ban on surrogacy, all under the branding of “God, Fatherland, and Family”⁵¹. However, unlike most other populist figures, Meloni remains incredibly pro-NATO and pro-Ukraine, which helped bridge the gap between populism and mainstream European right-wing ideologies⁵². This allows for the generalist view of populism to appear more approachable and less extreme than it really is.

⁴⁶ Kallmer, Brent. “How Viktor Orbán Wins | Journal of Democracy.” *Journal of Democracy*, 19 Dec. 2023, www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/how-viktor-orban-wins.

⁴⁷ *MEPs: Hungary can no longer be considered a full democracy | News | European Parliament*. (n.d.). <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220909IPR40137/meps-hungary-can-no-longer-be-considered-a-full-democracy>

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⁴⁸ Hough, Lucy, and Ali Rogin. “Hungary's Crackdown on Its LGBTQ Community Prompts Condemnation From European Leaders.” *PBS News*, 7 Aug. 2021, www.pbs.org/newshour/show/hungarys-crackdown-on-its-lgbtq-community-prompts-condemnation-from-european-leaders.

⁴⁹ Kávai Andrea Horváth, and Balázs Márton. “Hungary Starts Year With Loss of More Than €1 Billion in EU Subsidies.” *Telex*, 2 Jan. 2026, www.telex.hu/english/2026/01/02/hungary-starts-year-with-loss-of-more-than-eur1-billion-in-eu-subsidies.

⁵⁰ “Giorgia Meloni: Three Years in Power, Between European Pragmatism and National Ambiguities - IRIS.” *IRIS*, 3 Nov. 2025, www.iris-france.org/en/giorgia-meloni-three-years-in-power-between-european-pragmatism-and-national-ambiguities.

⁵¹ Giordano, Elena. “Giorgia Meloni: Italy a ‘Model to Follow’ on Migration.” *POLITICO*, 15 Oct. 2024, www.politico.eu/article/giorgia-meloni-italy-model-illegal-migration-policy.

⁵² ECPS_Admin. “Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (Fdi): Conservative, Populist, or Extreme Right? - ECPS.” *ECPS*, 27 July 2025, www.populismstudies.org/giorgia-melonis-brothers-of-italy-fdi-conservative-populist-or-extreme-right.

The Netherlands

The shock winners of the 2023 elections, the Party for Freedom (PVV), led by Geert Wilders, proved that populism could thrive in historically liberal nations, although the PVV-led coalition collapsed in June 2025 due to disputes over migration policy⁵³. The PVV successfully shifted Dutch policy towards the right permanently, as its own movement was largely based upon radical “de-Islamisation” principles, including banning the Quran and Mosques⁵⁴. The PVV also formally requested an “opt-out” option from EU asylum rules during their tenure⁵⁵.

Poland

Currently led by the Civic Coalition party (since 2023) with Donald Tusk as Prime Minister. But Poland faces a uniquely divided government, as while the Civic Coalition occupies the executive branch, the Presidency is held by the Law and Justice (PiS) party (since 2025)⁵⁶. The PiS party, which itself ruled the executive branch from 2015 to 2023, has maintained a nativist, Catholic-nationalist and anti-EU stance,⁵⁷ and while the Civic Coalition has enacted a “re-democratisation” policy to unblock EU funds, the 2025 election of the PiS party for the presidency has led to a legislative deadlock over judicial independence as well as abortion rights⁵⁸.

Council of Europe (CoE)

A distinct entity from the EU, the Council of Europe (CoE) is made up of 46 members and focuses mainly on human rights and rule of law violations. It comprises the Venice Commission, an advisory body of constitutional experts that has issued several opinions criticising democratic backsliding laws in Hungary and Poland⁵⁹. While these opinions are non-binding, they are often the “gold-standard” for

⁵³ Henley, Jon. “Geert Wilders’ Victory Confirms Upward Trajectory of Far Right in Europe.” *The Guardian*, 24 Nov. 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/24/geert-wilders-victory-confirms-upward-trajectory-of-far-right-in-europe.

⁵⁴ “Wilders Blows up Coalition Amid Elevated Uncertainty.” *ABN AMRO Bank*, www.abnamro.com/research/en/our-research/dutch-macro-perspectives-wilders-blows-up-coalition-amid-elevated.

⁵⁵ Henley, Jon. “Dutch Government Led by Far-right PVV Asks EU for Opt-out From Asylum Rules.” *The Guardian*, 18 Sept. 2024, www.theguardian.com/world/2024/sep/18/dutch-government-geert-wilders-pvv-brussels-opt-out-eu-asylum-rules.

⁵⁶ Fella, Stefano. “Poland: The Tusk Government and the 2025 Presidential Election.” *House of Commons Library*, House of Commons Library, 3 July 2025, www.researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10300/CBP-10300.pdf.

⁵⁷ Civicus. “Poland: Political Deadlock Looms.” *CIVICUS LENS*, 16 June 2025, www.lens.civicus.org/poland-political-deadlock-looms.

⁵⁸ *Donald Tusk Is Back: Finally a New Era in Polish-EU Relations?* www.epc.eu/publication/Donald-Tusk-is-back-Finally-a-new-era-in-Polish-EU-relations-54d6c0.

⁵⁹ “HUNGARY OPINION ON THE COMPATIBILITY WITH INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS STANDARDS OF THE FIFTEENTH AMENDMENT TO THE FUNDAMENTAL LAW OF HUNGARY.” *EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR*

the European Court of Justice (ECJ) when it issues binding rulings. The CoE also monitors xenophobia and hate speech through its Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), which provides an external legal standard against which populist policies are compared⁶⁰. The CoE can also directly request that the ECJ declare a state is formally refusing to obey a human rights ruling under Article 46 of its Convention.

European Union (EU)

The European Union (EU) acts as the primary institutional check on ethnic populists, with the European Commission launching multiple infringement procedures and freezing funds against member states that violate the rule of law of the EU (Article 7 Proceedings)⁶¹. Simultaneously, the European Parliament provides a key platform for populist movements to form powerful voting blocs such as the Patriots for Europe (PfE), which have the opportunity to significantly influence EU legislation on migration and environmental policy⁶². Such blocs have already successfully pushed other blocs to adopt some policies in their favour, with traditional blocs attempting to capture part of the populist voter share (which is ever increasing).

Patriots for Europe (PfE)

Patriots for Europe (PfE) functions as the replacement of older regional blocs such as the V4, and while only being founded in 2024, it is now the third-largest group within the European Parliament.⁶³ It is led by populist figures such as Viktor Orban and is comprised of populist, right-wing parties such as the RN and PVV. The PfE provides a unified legislative vehicle for ethnic populism,⁶⁴ and unlike previous groups, which focused on leaving the EU, the PfE aims to take over EU leadership and

DEMOCRACY THROUGH LAW OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE (VENICE COMMISSION), CDL-AD(2025)043, 13 Oct. 2025, [www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2025\)043-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2025)043-e).

⁶⁰ “European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) - Homepage - European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) - www.coe.int.” *European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)*, 30 Sept. 2025, www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance.

⁶¹ “Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation.” *European Commission*, www.commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/protection-eu-budget/rule-law-conditionality-regulation_en.

⁶² *Parliament Sounds the Alarm Over Hungary’s Deepening Rule of Law Crisis* | News | *European Parliament*. www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20251120IPR31492/parliament-sounds-the-alarm-over-hungary-s-deepening-rule-of-law-crisis.

⁶³ Sadecki, Andrzej. “Patriots for Europe: Orbán’s Attempt to Unite the Radical Right.” *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, 3 Feb. 2025, www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-07-23/patriots-europe-orbans-attempt-to-unite-radical-right.

⁶⁴ Wikipedia contributors. “Patriots.eu.” *Wikipedia*, 13 Jan. 2026, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriots.eu.

dismantle the current liberal consensus from within⁶⁵. Due to its large size, the bloc can essentially deadlock the legislative process within the EU. This forces the traditional parties to either negotiate or compromise by adopting some form of populist policy.

Blocs Expected

Alliance 1

This alliance is defined by its commitment to the preservation of liberal democratic standards across the EU. Its members argue that the challenges faced by Europe cannot be solved by individual nations but require a unified, federal response. This bloc prioritises the Rule of Law, judicial independence and the protection of minority rights, considering them non-negotiable foundations of EU membership. They view the rise of ethnic populism not as a legitimate political alternative, but as a form of democratic backsliding that deeply threatens the stability of the European internal market and Europe's collective security. Thus, the members actively advocate for the strengthening role of EU institutions in monitoring national governments, believing that European integration is the only effective shield against both global economic pressures and foreign disinformation.

Alliance 2

This alliance is defined by its strong challenging of the contemporary European order, uniting various subtypes of ethnic populism under a call for "national sovereignty". Its members argue against a federalised EU, viewing it as a project led by disconnected elites who prioritise liberal values over the specific cultural and security needs of native populations. This bloc prioritises majoritarianism, which asserts that a democratically elected government should have the power to give precedence to the interests of the native majority over international laws and minority protections. They demand a less powerful EU, where the union is reduced to a simple economic partnership and member states have total control over their borders, judiciaries and social policies. Thus, the members actively advocate for a complete halt in migration to protect and preserve traditional European heritage from perceived cultural, religious and institutional threats.

⁶⁵ Rankin, Jennifer, and Angela Giuffrida. "Le Pen and Orbán Join Forces in European Parliament Far-right Alliance." *The Guardian*, 8 July 2024, www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/08/le-pen-and-orban-join-forces-in-european-parliament-far-right-alliance.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
4 February 2000	The EU imposes diplomatic sanctions on Austria after the far-right FPO party rises to power. ⁶⁶
15 September 2008	The Lehman Brothers collapse triggered the Global Financial Crisis and the ensuing Eurozone debt crisis. ⁶⁷
29 May 2010	Viktor Orban wins a majority in Hungary, beginning an illiberal constitutional overhaul. ⁶⁸
August 2015	Over one million asylum seekers enter Europe, beginning the Refugee Crisis. ⁶⁹
23 June 2016	The UK population votes 52% in favour of leaving the EU in the Brexit Referendum. ⁷⁰
20 December 2017	The European Commission begins Article 7 disciplinary proceedings against Poland over judicial reforms. ⁷¹
12 September 2018	The European Parliament votes to begin Article 7 proceedings against Hungary for breaching EU values. ⁷²
16 December 2020	The European Union adopts a regulation linking budget access to Rule of Law compliance. ⁷³

⁶⁶ “The European Union’s Sanctions Against Austria.” *World Socialist Web Site*, 22 Feb. 2000, www.wsws.org/en/articles/2000/02/haid-f22.html.

⁶⁷ *The Lehman Case* | CCPG. www.ccp-global.org/the-lehman-case.

⁶⁸ Kallmer, Brent. “How Viktor Orbán Wins | Journal of Democracy.” *Journal of Democracy*, 19 Dec. 2023, www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/how-viktor-orban-wins.

⁶⁹ International Organization for Migration. “Irregular Migrant, Refugee Arrivals in Europe Top One Million in 2015: IOM.” *International Organization for Migration*, 22 Dec. 2015, www.iom.int/news/irregular-migrant-refugee-arrivals-europe-top-one-million-2015-iom.

⁷⁰ “Report: 23 June 2016 referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union.” *Electoral Commission*, 29 July 2022, www.electoralcommission.org.uk/research-reports-and-data/our-reports-and-data-past-elections-and-referendums/report-23-june-2016-referendum-uks-membership-european-union.

⁷¹ European Commission. *REASONED PROPOSAL IN ACCORDANCE WITH ARTICLE 7(1) OF THE TREATY ON EUROPEAN UNION REGARDING THE RULE OF LAW IN POLAND*. 2017/0360 (APP), 20 Dec. 2017, www.ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/document.cfm?action=display&doc_id=49108.

⁷² *EUR-Lex - 52018IP0340 - EN - EUR-Lex*. www.eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018IP0340.

⁷³ *Protecting the EU Budget — Rule of Law* | *EUR-Lex*. 1 Jan. 2021, www.eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/protecting-the-eu-budget-rule-of-law.html.

9 June 2024	The European Parliament elections see roughly 27% of seats going to far-right parties. ⁷⁴
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Relevant UN Resolutions, Treaties & Events

- [Combating glorification of Nazism, neo-Nazism and other practises that contribute to fuelling contemporary forms of racism, 19th December 2023 \(A/RES/78/190\)](#):
- [From rhetoric to reality: a global call for concrete action against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, 10th October 2024 \(A/HRC/RES/57/25\)](#):
- [Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, 24th December 2021 \(A/RES/76/227\)](#):
- [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 21st December 1965 \(A/RES/2106\(XX\)\)](#):

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

EU Legal Mechanisms (Article 7)

The European Commission and European Parliament have previously utilised Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) in attempts to suspend the voting rights of Poland and Hungary, in 2017 and 2018 respectively, following systematic breaches of the Rule of Law⁷⁵. These proceedings successfully induced international attention on democratic backsliding but largely failed as a deterrent. This was mostly due to the unanimity requirement of the European Council, which meant that the final stage of sanctions could not proceed. Poland and Hungary both harnessed this in order to create a form of mutual defence pact, where either nation would veto any punitive action that is being attempted towards the other⁷⁶.

Financial Conditionality

⁷⁴ Cracknell, Richard, and Stefano Fella. "EU elections 2024: Results and the new European Parliament - House of Commons Library." *House of Commons Library*, 22 Jan. 2026, www.commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10068.

⁷⁵ "Breaches of EU Values: How the EU Can Act (Infographic) | Topics | European Parliament." *Topics | European Parliament*, www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20180222STO98434/breaches-of-eu-values-how-the-eu-can-act-infographic.

⁷⁶ Pech, Laurent, and Kim Scheppele. "Is Article 7 Really the EU's 'Nuclear Option'?" *intR2Dok (Staatsbibliothek Zu Berlin)*, Mar. 2018, doi:10.17176/20180306-092411.

In response to the aforementioned limitations of Article 7, the EU successfully adopted the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation, which allows for the freezing of EU funds if judicial independence or corruption risks threaten the EU's financial interests. Beginning in late 2022, the EU froze billions in Cohesion and Recovery (RRF) funds intended for Hungary and Poland as a consequence of this regulation⁷⁷. This proved to be an immensely more effective deterrent, as the consequent economic pressure and prospect of losing billions in development aid incentivised Polish voters to elect a pro-EU coalition in 2023⁷⁸. Similarly, Hungary was pressured into enacting partial judicial reforms to unfreeze a portion of the funds. This overall demonstrates that financial leverage and conditionality are the EU's most powerful tools in terms of resolving Rule of Law violations⁷⁹.

European Court of Justice (ECJ) Litigation

In addition to the aforementioned financial conditionality measures, the EU has and continues to increasingly rely upon binding rulings by the ECJ on the topic of Rule of Law violations⁸⁰. This approach required that the European Commission expedite infringement procedures against Rule of Law violations within the EU, particularly issues such as judicial restructuring and the legality of “sovereignty” laws being imposed by populist governments⁸¹. This has allowed the effective bypassing of the political deadlock within the European Council, as precedent is set by the ECJ for regional and local courts on ethnic populist violations of the Rule of Law⁸². A prime example of the effectiveness of this approach was the ECJ's imposition of daily fines against member states that refuse to dismantle illegal disciplinary chambers for judges, which has and continues to create growing debt within populist administrations⁸³. This debt becomes all the more difficult to excuse to the public the longer it lasts and hence acts as a highly effective method of tackling the rise of ethnic nationalism.

⁷⁷ “Freezing EU Funds: An Effective Tool to Enforce the Rule of Law?” *Centre for European Reform*, www.cer.eu/insights/freezing-eu-funds-effective-tool-enforce-rule-law.

⁷⁸ European Democracy Hub and European Democracy Hub. “The EU's Role in Poland's Democratic Turnaround.” *European Democracy Hub*, 25 Mar. 2025, www.europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/the-eus-role-in-polands-democratic-turnaround.

⁷⁹ Intern. “EU To Freeze €7.5 Billion in EU Funds to Hungary Over Rule of Law Concerns.” *Netherlands Helsinki Committee*, 2 Dec. 2022, www.nhc.nl/eu-to-freeze-e7-5-billion-in-eu-funds-to-hungary-over-rule-of-law-concerns.

⁸⁰ “Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation.” *European Commission*, www.commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/protection-eu-budget/rule-law-conditionality-regulation_en.

⁸¹ “Infringement Procedure.” *European Commission*, 15 July 2022, www.commission.europa.eu/law/application-eu-law/implementing-eu-law/infringement-procedure_en.

⁸² RPEX. www.infocuria.curia.europa.eu/tabs/affair?sort=AFF_NUM-DESC&searchTerm=%22C-619%2F18%22&publishedId=C-619%2F18.

⁸³ Court of Justice of the European Union. *Order of the Vice-President of the Court in Case C-204/21 R Commission V Poland*. 27 Oct. 2021, www.curia.europa.eu/site/upload/docs/application/pdf/2021-10/cp210192en.pdf.

Intercultural Cities (ICC) Programme

The Council of Europe (CoE) initiated the Intercultural Cities (ICC) Programme as an urban policy network that encouraged cities to treat diversity as an asset instead of a liability⁸⁴. Effectively, through this programme, interculturalism was integrated into housing, education and public space design on a local level. The programme has been immensely successful on a local level in reducing prejudice and creating social cohesion within communities⁸⁵. Yet despite this success, the programme has largely failed to scale up to a national level, as it clashes with broader nativist narratives that are often promoted at the national level by populist administrations⁸⁶.

Possible Solutions

Smart Conditionality

The current European Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation is concretely the most effective mechanism to combat democratic backsliding; however, its mandate remains narrow. To resolve the root causes of ethnic populism, the EU could transition to a “Smart Conditionality” framework, involving the expansion of the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation’s scope to include fundamental rights, such as free press and the protection of ethnic and religious minorities. This should be monitored by an expanded mandate to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) and the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO), which should provide the European Commission with objective, data-dependent reports on rule of law violations. To prevent populist leaders from claiming that this improved regulation is an attack from “foreign elites”, a direct funding bypass could be implemented, under which, when a national government is found to be backsliding, the suspended EU funds could instead be directly funnelled into local municipalities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to ensure that essential services continue to function.

Depolarisation via Deliberative Democracy

The entire concept of ethnic populism is based upon the “us versus them” divide and often frames complex political issues as an entirely black and white affair between “the people” and dangerous outsiders or corrupt institutions. However, a structural antidote to this is available, and it is

⁸⁴ “Intercultural Cities (ICC) Programme and Network - What is it and how to join - FAQ.” *Intercultural Cities Programme*, 27 Nov. 2025, www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/how-to-join-.

⁸⁵ “Results and impact of the Intercultural Cities programme.” *Intercultural Cities Programme*, 24 June 2025, www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/results-and-impact.

⁸⁶ “Intercultural Cities: How it works.” *Intercultural Cities Programme*, 24 June 2025, www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/how-it-works-.

deliberative democracy, particularly the establishment of citizens' assemblies. Such assemblies could be initiated by the European Commission's Vice-President for Democracy and Demography and should be implemented by governments on a local level. These assemblies allow ordinary people who are randomly selected and demographically representative to engage with the resolution of high-tension issues, particularly migration quotas or climate goals. By providing participants with access to impartial expert testimony and a structured environment for debate, such assemblies yield the capability to reduce the polarisation that populist actors all too often exploit. It is important to note that similar assemblies have already yielded success in countries such as Ireland⁸⁷. By scaling such assemblies to a pan-European or EU level, citizens can be re-engaged in the democratic process, allowing them to produce policy recommendations that reflect a genuine public consensus rather than the polarised extremes that are often presented by traditional media.

Media Literacy and Algorithmic Regulation

Social media serves as the primary method for ethnic populist disinformation, and thus any long-term solution must take digital space into account. One way that this could be achieved is by strengthening the Digital Services Act (DSA), so that transparency in social media algorithms is part of its mandate. This would entail forcing Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) to open their algorithms to the European Board for Digital Services auditors. The DSA already provides a framework for removing illegal hate speech; however, an expansion of the act could instead involve forcing platforms to “de-amplify” content that has been identified as disinformation by independent bodies. Member States could also simultaneously implement mandatory Media Literacy education within national school curricula to better prepare younger generations for attempts at disinformation by teaching skills such as lateral reading and source verification techniques.

Transnational Subsidiarity and City Coalitions

The institutionalisation of transnational subsidiarity allows sub-national actors to form coalitions that can bypass national populist governments. This approach could include the creation of networks such as the “Pact of Free Cities”, which is an alliance of mayors from Budapest, Prague, Warsaw, and Bratislava, who collectively lobby for direct EU funding⁸⁸. A fund separate from the EU budget could be

⁸⁷ Observatory of Public Sector Innovation. “The Irish Citizens' Assembly - Observatory of Public Sector Innovation.” *Observatory of Public Sector Innovation*, 5 Feb. 2019, www.oecd-opsi.org/innovations/the-irish-citizens-assembly.

⁸⁸ “Welcome | Pact of Free Cities.” *Prague Design System*, www.pactoffreecities.com.

created for the support of the “Intercultural Cities” model in states where national governments oppose it. This would act as a check on ethnic populist governments, as cities are able to bypass them for the purpose of maintaining high democratic standards. This allows cities in countries with ongoing Article 7 procedures to be able to maintain their EU funding despite the withholding of funding on a national level. It is important to note, however, that this solution has a high possibility of creating a city-state type of friction between regional and national governments.

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